

551 Television and Radio Interview: "After Two Years—a Conversation With the President." December 17, 1962

WILLIAM H. LAWRENCE, American Broadcasting Company: [1.] As you look back upon your first 2 years in office, sir, has your experience in the office matched your expectations? You had studied a good deal the power of the Presidency, the methods of its operations. How has this worked out as you saw it in advance?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, I think in the first place the problems are more difficult than I had imagined they were. Secondly, there is a limitation upon the ability of the United States to solve these problems. We are involved now in the Congo in a very difficult situation. We have been unable to secure an implementation of the policy which we have supported. We are involved in a good many other areas. We are trying to see if a solution can be found to the struggle between Pakistan and India, with whom we want to maintain friendly relations. Yet they are unable to come to an agreement. There is a limitation; in other words, upon the power of the United States to bring about solutions.

I think our people get awfully impatient and maybe fatigued and tired, and saying "We have been carrying this burden for 17 years; can we lay it down?" We can't lay it down, and I don't see how we are going to lay it down in this century.

So that I would say that the problems are more difficult than I had imagined them to be. The responsibilities placed on the United States are greater than I imagined them to be, and there are greater limitations upon our ability to bring about a favorable result than I had imagined them to be. And I think that is probably true of anyone who becomes President, because there is such a difference between those who advise or speak or legislate, and between the man who must select from the various alternatives proposed and say that this shall be the policy of the United States. It is much easier to make

the speeches than it is to finally make the judgments, because unfortunately your advisers are frequently divided. If you take the wrong course, and on occasion I have, the President bears the burden of the responsibility quite rightly. The advisers may move on to new advice.

[2.] Mr. Lawrence: Well, Mr. President, that brings up a point that has always interested me. How does a President go about making a decision, like Cuba, for example?

THE PRESIDENT. The most recent one was hammered out really on policy and decision over a period of 5 or 6 days. During that period, the 15 people more or less who were directly consulted frequently changed their view; because whatever action we took had so many disadvantages to it, and each action that we took raised the prospect that it might escalate with the Soviet Union into a nuclear war. Finally, however, I think a general consensus developed, and certainly seemed after all alternatives were examined, that the course of action that we finally adopted was the right one.

Now, when I talked to members of the Congress, several of them suggested a different alternative, when we confronted them on that Monday with the evidence. My feeling is that if they had gone through the 5-day period we had gone through in looking at the various alternatives, the advantages and disadvantages of action, they probably would have come out the same way that we did. I think that we took the right one. If we had had to act on Wednesday in the first 24 hours, I don't think probably we would have chosen as prudently as we finally did, a quarantine against the use of offensive weapons.

In addition, that had much more power than we first thought it did, because I think the Soviet Union was very reluctant to have us stop ships which carried with them a good deal of their highly secret and sensitive material. One of the reasons I think that the

Soviet Union withdrew the IL-28's was because we were carrying on very intensive low-level photography. Now, no one would have guessed, probably, that that would have been such a harassment. Mr. Castro could not permit us to indefinitely continue widespread flights over his island at 200 feet every day, and yet he knew if he shot down one of our planes, that then it would bring back a much more serious reprisal on him. So it is very difficult to always make judgments here about what the effect will be of our decisions on other countries. In this case, it seems to me that we did pick the right one; in Cuba of 1961 we picked the wrong one.

[3.] George E. Herman, Columbia Broadcasting System: I would like to go back to the question of the consensus and your relationship to the consensus. You have said and the Constitution says that the decision can be made only by the President.

THE PRESIDENT. Well, you know that old story about Abraham Lincoln and the Cabinet. He says, "All in favor, say 'aye,'" and the whole cabinet voted "aye," and then, "All opposed, 'no,'" and Lincoln voted "no," and he said, "The vote is no." So that naturally the Constitution places the responsibility on the President. There was some disagreement with the course we finally adopted, but the course we finally adopted had the advantage of permitting other steps if this one was unsuccessful. In other words, we were starting in a sense at a minimum place. Then if that were unsuccessful, we could have gradually stepped it up until we had gone into a much more massive action, which might have become necessary if the first step had been unsuccessful. I would think that the majority finally came to accept that, though at the beginning there was a much sharper division. And after all, this was very valuable, because the people who were involved had particular responsibilities of their own; Mr. McNamara, Secretary of Defense, who therefore had to advise me on the military capacity of the United States in that area, the Secretary of State, who had to advise on the attitude of the

OAS and NATO. So that in my opinion the majority came to accept the course we finally took. It made it much easier. In the Cuba of 1961 the advice of those who were brought in on the executive branch was also unanimous, and the advice was wrong. And I was responsible. So that finally it comes down that no matter how many advisers you have, frequently they are divided, and the President must finally choose.

The other point is something that President Eisenhower said to me on January 19th. He said "There are no easy matters that will ever come to you as President. If they are easy, they will be settled at a lower level." So that the matters that come to you as President are always the difficult matters, and matters that carry with them large implications. So this contributes to some of the burdens of the office of the Presidency, which other Presidents have commented on.

[4.] Sander Vanocur, National Broadcasting Company: Mr. President, during the Cuban crisis, there was some problem that you are apparently familiar with and bored with by now, about the possibility of a President talking in very private and secret conversations with his advisers, and that somehow leaking out. Do you think that this is going to inhibit the free, frank flow of advice that every President has to have?

THE PRESIDENT. No, I think it is unfortunate there are that sort of conversations, but there are what—1300 reporters accredited to the White House alone? There are I suppose 100 or 150 people who are familiar with what goes on in the Security Council meetings in one way or another. You have the people who are actually there. Then you have got the others who are given instructions as a result of the decisions there, and I suppose people do talk. And then as I said at the time of the Cuban disaster in April of 1961 that success has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan. I suppose when something goes well, there is more tendency to talk at all levels, and frequently the reports are inaccurate. I would say the security is

sic task which we have not mastered yet, and I don't think he has. The offense has the advantage.

Mr. Herman: You think he has mastered the art of hitting one bullet?

THE PRESIDENT. Yes; so have we.

[14.] Mr. Lawrence: Mr. President, you spoke the other day of the dangers and difficulties of slow communications between here and the Soviet Union, as it exhibited itself during the Cuban crisis. I suppose this would be an even graver problem if your radar screen were to pick up missiles or at least what appeared to be missiles in any substantial number?

THE PRESIDENT. Yes. Well, there is—one of the arguments for the continuation of the airplane is that if you picked up missiles coming toward you, you could have your planes take off and be in the air. Then if it proved to be a false alarm, then you could call them back. For missiles, you can't do that, and the President might have to make a judgment in a 15-minute period, and the information would be incomplete. You recall that incident where the moon came up, and it appeared to be a whole variety of missiles coming in. Of course, it was picked up several years ago. I think that is oversimplified. The fact of the matter is that the United States could wait quite long because we have missiles in hardened sites, and those missiles, even if there was a missile attack on the United States, those missiles could still be fired and destroy the Soviet Union, and so could the Polaris submarine missiles. So that I don't think there is a danger that we would fire based on incomplete and inaccurate information, because we were only given 5 or 6 minutes to make a judgment. I think the Polaris alone permits us to wait to make sure that we are going to have sufficient in hand that he knows that we could destroy the Soviet Union. After all, that is the purpose of the deterrent. Once he fires his missiles, it is all over anyway, because we are going to have sufficient resources to fire back at him to destroy the Soviet Union. When that

day comes, and there is a massive exchange, then that is the end, because you are talking about Western Europe, the Soviet Union, the United States, of 150 million fatalities in the first 18 hours. Now, you could go on, if everybody aimed at cities in order to have as many killed as possible in all these communities with all the weapons you could fire, you could kill, and then you might be having more fire. So that the nuclear age is a very dangerous period, and that is why I frequently read these speeches about how we must do this and that. But I think they ought to just look at what we are talking about.

Mr. Lawrence: How urgent is this need for quicker communication between here and the Soviet Union?

THE PRESIDENT. It is desirable. It is not—if he fires his missiles at us, it is not going to do any good for us to have a telephone at the Kremlin—but I do think that—and ask him whether it is really true. But I do think that it is better that we should be quicker than we now are. It took us some hours in the Cuban matter, and I think that communication is important. In addition to the communications with the Kremlin, we have very poor communications to a good deal of Latin America, and we don't know what is going on there very frequently. So we are trying to improve our communications all around the world, because that knowledge is so vital to an effective decision.

[15.] Mr. Vanocur: Mr. President, have you noted since you have been in office that this terrible responsibility for the fate of mankind has—notwithstanding the differences that divide you—has drawn you and Mr. Khrushchev somewhat closer in this joint sense of responsibility? He seems to betray it, especially in his speech to the Supreme Soviet earlier.

THE PRESIDENT. I think in that speech this week he showed his awareness of the nuclear age. But of course, the Cuban effort has made it more difficult for us to carry out any successful negotiations, because this was an effort to materially change the balance of

pletely twisted view of the United States, and that we don't comprehend them, that is what makes life in the sixties hazardous.

[16.] Mr. Herman: Your discussion of contact with the Soviet Union, of operating and acting with care, leads me irresistibly to the picture of Mr. Gromyko sitting right here, perhaps on this very couch?—

THE PRESIDENT. Right here.

Mr. Herman: Right there—just before—

THE PRESIDENT. Right next to Mr. Vanocur.

Mr. Vanocur: He is no friend of mine.

Mr. Herman: But there was an occasion when you were in contact, he spoke to you, he told you his very interesting version of the absence of all missiles in Cuba, of the absence of all offensive missiles in Cuba. Now, you were in contact. What did you have to do? Did you have to get up and grit your teeth and walk around the chair?

THE PRESIDENT. No, I read to him my September statement, in which we said we would take action if they put missiles in. He did not respond. That is why I say, we are quite a long way from being—Mr. Khrushchev and I are in the same boat in the sense of both having this nuclear capacity, and also both wanting to protect our societies. Where we are not on the same wave is that the Soviets expand their power and are determined to, and have demonstrated in Cuba their willingness to take great risks, which can only bring about a direct collision. Now, I spent a whole day at Vienna² talking about his speech he made on January 6, 1961, in which he said he was going to support wars of liberation, and I said this is the way for the United States and the Soviet Union to end up in direct confrontation, which is what happened in Cuba. You can't have too many of those, because we are not sure on every occasion that the Soviet Union will withdraw as they did in the case of

Cuba. And the United States finds it difficult to withdraw when our vital interests are involved.

Mr. Lawrence: Mr. President, were you tempted at any time when Gromyko sat there open-faced and said that there were no offensive weapons, to just get up and go to your desk and pick up a photograph—

THE PRESIDENT. No, because our information was incomplete and we had not completely determined what our policy would be. The information came in Tuesday, our conversation was on Thursday. We were carrying out intensive reconnaissance. We were still considering the advisability of another course of action. And therefore, it would have been very unwise for us to inform him in detail what we knew. We did not want to give him the satisfaction of announcing what he was doing. I think it was very important that the United States announced it before he did.

Mr. Lawrence: We might have lost the initiative then?

THE PRESIDENT. Yes. He might have announced it, and we would have been responding then to an initiative of theirs. This way we held the initiative. So it was very important that we not tell him, although I did not mislead him, because as I say, I read my September statement, and he must have wondered why I was reading it. But he did not respond.

[17.] Mr. Vanocur: Mr. President, a lot of people have said that it is necessary—and these are a lot of the demonologists who have some knowledge about the Soviet Union—that it is necessary for an American President to protect Mr. Khrushchev, because he is the best Soviet prime minister we will ever get. Do you feel that is really the duty of an American President or is it the duty of an American President to protect the national interest?

THE PRESIDENT. No, I don't think it is our duty to protect Mr. Khrushchev. This argument that his successor would be worse—I don't know what his successor will be like. What I think is our duty is to try to protect

² Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko had visited the President on October 18.

³ See 1951 volume, this series, p. 438.

clashing over an area of vital importance. So that I think is a very salutary fact. But I don't think we are about to see a whole change in Communist policy.

Mr. Herman: Would there have been any breakthrough if there had been international inspection of Cuba allowed, do you think, a start, a thin edge of a wedge?

THE PRESIDENT. No, I don't think that would have materially affected it, because I don't think we would have gotten the kind of inspection which really is necessary, because a totalitarian system cannot accept the kind of inspection which really is desirable. What you are saying really is that Cuba be opened, the Soviet Union be opened. They are not going to open it, because a totalitarian system must exist only in secrecy.

Mr. Herman: Have the inspections that we have had anywhere in the world, for example, in North Korea, or any place else, given you any hope that it will work as a system?

THE PRESIDENT. No, the camera I think is actually going to be our best inspector.

Mr. Lawrence: Mr. President, is there anything in the end of the Cuban crisis or the substantial end of it, at least getting off a fever pitch, and other problems around the world that would lead you to think that a summit meeting would be useful any time in the near future?

THE PRESIDENT. No, not now. I think that the Vienna meeting was useful. It was useful for me, and I think—but I don't think we should go back to that, unless we really see our way clear to making an agreement on nuclear testing or disarmament, or in Europe itself, coming to some understanding. That is what we really want to do. As I say, this is too dangerous a period for us to be or to want to have a tension between the Soviet Union and the United States, and therefore I think we should encourage any relaxation of their policy of supporting those causes hostile to us. But until we see some breakthrough in some one area, I don't see there is much advantage in Mr. Khrushchev and I meeting, even though we have been in

communication, and therefore I think at least we have some—and we are in negotiation in New York through our representatives, but I don't think there is a need for us to meet now. I think probably he feels the same way.

[19.] Mr. Lawrence: Many expected, Mr. President, that Berlin would "hot up" right after our elections. That seemed to be the timetable, perhaps incorrectly. Is there any feeling on your part that what happened in Cuba has led to greater caution in Berlin in so far as the Soviet and East German Governments are concerned?

THE PRESIDENT. Oh, I think the Chairman—nobody wants to go through what we went through in Cuba very often, and I think they realize that West Berlin is a vital interest to us, and that we are committed there, and that we are going to stay there. On the other hand, he has a very vital interest in East Germany, in trying to prop up that regime, and trying to solidify his position in Eastern Europe. So Berlin is a dangerous position always, particularly because of its geography, because we have to keep communications to an area which is 120 miles behind their lines so this always gives them a chance to tighten the grip on our windpipe there. But I would think he would proceed with some care, because I think he realizes it is the combination of a vital interest and one which has the chance of a direct encounter. So that I think that, as I say, Mr. Khrushchev's speech showed that he knows. And those who are attacking Mr. Khrushchev in the Communist camp, particularly the Chinese, as being too soft—I think Mr. Khrushchev realizes the care with which he must proceed now, as do we.

[20.] Mr. Herman: Would you explain, sir, why you said in your toast to Chancellor Adenauer that this was a turning point, a new era in history?

THE PRESIDENT. I think it is a climactic period. We have had a number of them. It is not *the*, but it is—after all, Cuba was the first time that the Soviet Union and the

United States directly faced each other with the prospect of the use of military forces being used by the United States and the Soviet Union, which could possibly have escalated into a nuclear struggle. That is an important fact. Secondly, the Chinese-Indian struggle, between these two enormous countries, the two largest countries in the world, when the Soviet has devoted so many years to building its policy of friendship with India, the fact that China then attacked them. And third, the relation between the Soviet Union and China, as a result of the Sino-Indian dispute, as a result of the United States dispute with the Soviet Union over Cuba, I would say that that makes this a very important period.

[21.] Mr. Vanocur: Sir, how do you as the leader of the Western alliance, of the strongest member nation, how do you get the European countries, which are becoming increasingly more independent, increasingly more prosperous, which is what you said you hoped they would become, how do you get them to follow your lead? Apparently Secretaries McNamara and Rusk have not come back with an altogether satisfactory report from the NATO meeting, the Europeans seem unwilling to build conventional forces. Do you have any great power to determine—

THE PRESIDENT. No, in the first place you can do your part. We are doing our part. We have—our troops in Western Europe are the best equipped, we have six divisions, which is about a fourth of all of the divisions on the Western front. They are the best equipped. They can fight tomorrow, which is not true of most of the other units. So we are doing our part there, and we are also providing the largest naval force in the world. We are also providing the nuclear force in the world, and we are also carrying out the major space program for the free world, as well as carrying the whole burden in South Viet-Nam. So the United States is more than doing its part. We hope Western Europe will make a greater effort on its own, both in developing conventional forces, and

in assistance to the underdeveloped world.

Now, we can't force them to do it. We can't say, "Well, if you won't do it, we are going to withdraw our forces and leave Europe naked." But I think the United States has done pretty well in carrying its burdens, and we hope that Western Europe, now that it is prosperous, will do its part. We put \$12 billion in Western Europe in 4 years, from '48 to '52. The amount of assistance we have given Latin America for the Alliance for Progress is a fraction of that.

So we have a right, it seems to me, as we have done and proven that we are not sunshine soldiers with respect to Europe itself, there isn't a country in Europe that is putting, of the countries that we are talking about, that is putting as many men and as large a proportion of its population and its gross national product into defense as we are.

[22.] Mr. Vanocur: Well, sir, do you reach a point where you have to say, "Fish or cut bait; I can't go to the American people and ask them to assume this burden if they know that you are going to do this?" For example, the Skybolt.

THE PRESIDENT. Well, look at the Skybolt. The United States has developed the Skybolt. We put in \$350 million into Skybolt. No other country has put anything into the actual manufacture of Skybolt. If we completed it, the British would have bought a hundred missiles, we would have bought a thousand. It would have cost us \$2.5 billion. We today pay 30 percent of the infrastructure costs of NATO, the supply lines to the depots in Europe. It costs us about \$3 billion in our balance of payments. The aid we give around the world is—you know, the American people are very critical, and the American press prints a lot of bad news, because bad news is news and good news is not news, so they get an impression always that the United States is not doing its part. When I just think of what we have done for 15 years, since '45, the countries we have sustained, the alliances of which we are the whole, the center, the willingness of the United States to accept burdens all around